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Better Homes & Granola



Stephanie Diani for The New York Times

Rachel Hardin and Cody Nickell in the new Whole Foods Lifestyle store in West Hollywood.

By JANELLE BROWN

Published: November 20, 2005

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WEST HOLLYWOOD

BEHOLD the hemp trouser. Designed by a company called Ecolution, it has a \$56.29 price tag and comes in grassy green with wide legs and a drawstring. The fabric is nubbly and scratchy. It is a hair-shirt sort of garment that only someone truly dedicated to saving the environment and immune to fashion would wear without a grimace.

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Across the aisle in the new Whole Foods Market Lifestyle store here, there's a pair of organic cotton jeans - boot-cut, stylishly frayed, with the detailed pockets in vogue on the runways. The jeans, by Loomstate, cost \$164 and would not be out of place at Barneys New York.

Organic chic has long been an oxymoron, but in the view of Whole Foods, its time is arriving. The specialty food market, the fastest growing grocery chain in the nation, has



Stephanie Diani for The New York Times

Sandi Gardiner, 22, considers a pair of yoga pants. The store also carries chic jeans.

taken organic produce, meat and prepared meals to mainstream consumers by giving them an epicurean polish. Now the store is turning to hemp pants, scarves and purses.

Green goods have been a minor staple of the American marketplace since the 1960's when Rachel Carson's antipesticide classic "Silent Spring" ushered in the environmental movement. The hemp and organic cotton industries followed in the 80's, but they didn't catch on with mall-bound shoppers. Clothing made of hemp, a fiber traditionally used in rope and sailcloth, was typically unattractive, uncomfortable and hard to find. But earth-friendly products, including housewares, linens, furniture, baby gear and paint, now appear to be following the same path as organic food, from crunchy fringe to high style.

"The product has reached the right price point, quality and, particularly for clothing, styling, so it isn't sackcloth anymore," said Michael Bescanson, the president of Whole Food's Southern Pacific region.

There are signs that consumers are opening their minds - and their wallets - to green products. According to the Organic Consumers Association, an advocacy group, sales of organic and natural products total \$45 billion a year, 10 percent of all retail grocery sales. And while what are known as lifestyle products represent only a fraction of that number - organic cotton clothing, the largest segment, sold \$100 million last year - the market for them is growing at 20 to 22 percent a year, the association said.

"We are at a point where a critical mass of consumers are starting to vote with their pocketbooks for health and sustainability," said Ronnie Cummins, the association's national director. "Whole Foods is very smart about their business move. They would not do this if the times weren't right."

But the chain's plan to make organic cotton linens as irresistible as free-range chickens remains a gamble. Organic Style magazine, which advocated eco-chic living, had 761,822 readers but folded in September after newsstand sales dropped 26 percent. The publishing company, Rodale, said at the time that "the magazine was deemed not to be a viable long-term business for us to pursue."

Andrew Wolf, an analyst with BB&T Capital Markets, an equity research firm based in Winston-Salem, N.C., speculated that the green clothing marketplace is still populated primarily by health buffs worried about their children's rashes, rather than with style and fashion sophisticates. "It's a very small and nichey market," he said. "It's much like the

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natural health business was 30 years ago. It stands to reason that the lifestyle side could make similar advances, but it's not clear how."

Sharon Lee, a founder of the consumer-research firm Look-Look, said that 14- to 35-year-olds are expressing a growing interest in those kinds of products - to a point. "It can't just be hemp with no style," she said. "It has to deliver on all things that people want their lifestyle to be, current, forward, fashionable."

The West Hollywood Lifestyle store, opened a few weeks ago in one of Los Angeles's most trend-conscious neighborhoods, is Whole Foods's first such venture. It stocks hundreds of earth-friendly items of clothing and accessories like scarves and handbags. Mr. Bescanson said it was logical that the chain's clientele would turn its eye to hard goods like towels and trousers. "There's a demand on the part of the consumer for more environmentally friendly products," he said. "This is a significant market, and it's getting bigger, and it's an influential market. Certainly we want to capture our portion of it as the leading organic retailer in the country."

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